DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 284 IR 055 568

AUTHOR Vesper, Virginia
TITLE The Image of the Librarian in Murder Mysteries in the Twentieth Century.
INSTITUTION Middle Tennessee State Univ., Murfreesboro.
PUB DATE [94]
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization; Females; *Fiction; *Librarians; Salaries; Sex Differences; *Social Attitudes; *Stereotypes; Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS *Mysteries (Literature); *Twentieth Century

ABSTRACT

This document, which discusses the image of librarians in 20th century murder mysteries, suggests that the image initially evolved from an elitist spirit that was the result of the missionary zeal and cultural superiority of early librarians, and that the image of the old maid librarian was probably based on the reality that early women college graduates were forced to choose between marriage or career. Examples of the stereotyping of librarians in various murder mysteries are provided, in addition to later works that indicate the movement away from the stereotype. Topics include the difference between the portrayal of male and female librarians, the growth of concern about the librarian image, salaries, the image of the library director, and the entrance of technology such as online catalogs and online searching. (Contains 27 references.) (AEF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

ED 385 284

The Image of the Librarian in Murder Mysteries in the Twentieth Century

Virginia Vesper
Todd Library
Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, TN 37133

IR055568

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Virginia Vesper

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Whether librarians are amused or annoyed, one of the most recognizable professional stereotypes is that of the librarian. A bespectacled female, with her graying hair pulled back in a bun, sensible shoes on her feet, and her finger upon her pursed lips, shushing any noisy library patron has been the favored image of the media. The grim spinster and other unflattering images have been haunting librarians for over a century. In the first issue of American Library Journal in 1876, Melvil Dewey celebrated the end of the image of the librarian as a "mouser in musty books".

But, there is usually some truth in all stereotypes. Was there any truth in the portrayal of the librarians in popular fiction? A perfect place to search for such stereotypical images of the librarian in popular fiction would be in murder mysteries and detective fiction which rely on plot rather than character. Do the characterizations in these novels give readers only the image that they expect, or do they accurately reflect librarians and the library world. Looking at the librarians that appear in mystery novels during the twentieth century, there is a definite transformation in the image of the librarian from the grim spinster to the information specialist, who is amused by the older image.

Venturing back to the beginning of the twentieth century, we find that the image is firmly planted in the public's mind, and even the eminent librarian, Edmund Pearson commented on one aspect of the image when he noted the fondness of women librarians for a pince-nez that is fastened to the hair by a small gold chain.

Though Pearson took a humorous look at the image, he acknowledged that librarians had a legitimate quarrel with the "preposterous caricatures of librarians in popular fiction. (Pearson 3)

Where did the image come from that was already so prevalent at the beginning of the century, and was it true? There was an element of truth in the image. Early members of the Library profession were expected to have a college education, belong to a highly respectable family, and to possess a moral fervor to shape the reading public. Missionary zeal and cultural superiority combined to form an elitist spirit that was still prevalent when women began entering the profession in large numbers. Librarianship was a profession that for women fit in with accepted feminine limitations. Acting as moral guardian, cultural guide and gracious hostess was seen as an extension of the maternal and biological role(Garrison 185). "When the elitist spirit of public library leadership interacted with the predominance of women in the profession, the result was the "library hostess," a respectable middle-class lady who demonstrates some of the stereotypical traits of that grim, prim spinster librarian who has become a commonplace figure in American popular thought. (Garrison xiv) The image of the old maid librarian was probably based on the reality that early women college graduates were forced to choose between marriage or career since society did not allow them to do both.

The librarian in Streaked with Crimson is an example of the prim spinster. Written in 1929 by Charles Dutton, this novel

includes Miss Abigail Tripp, town librarian and scion of one of the oldest families in Mansfield. In fact, few people could think back far enough to remember when she had not been the town librarian. She is described as a thin, nervous librarian, whose age was around sixty, and whose mannerisms both amused and exasperated. She was a fussy, talkative woman, whose opinions were very set and with a curiosity which was never satisfied; nosy and judgmental not only about books but about people and the way they live their lives (101). As you would expect in a murder mystery, this only leads to trouble for old Miss Tripp. Miss Tripp certainly reflects the image of the era. Her insatiable curiosity is a trait that is going to reappear in almost every librarian populating a murder mystery. Also the tradition of the small town librarian being from one of the founding families in the community does not die out easily, at least in mystery novels. In All the Crazy Winters by Deborah Adams, 1992, the librarian of the Jesus Creek Public Library is killed. The assistant librarian expects to take her place but the board appoints a young women who is thinking about going to Library School as head of the library, "since as a member of an old and trusted family, (she) would be more acceptable to the patrons. As a board member states, " It is traditional for the head librarian to be a member one of the original families" (158).

Librarians of the thirties, judging by the articles that appeared in *Wilson Library Bulletin* were extremely sensitive to the

old image and struggled to break away from it. When a visiting Englishman commented on the number of women in the library profession in the United States, this sparked a heated discussion in Wilson Library Bulletin in 1933, "Should the Preponderance of Women in the American Library Profession Be Considered an Evil?" Male librarians responded with a vengeance even though they held the majority of administrative positions. Real concern for the image in the 1930's is evident in the numerous articles in professional journals such as, "Are Librarians People," the first of three articles in the December 1936 issue that viewed and analyzed the personality and qualifications of librarians as a class. The more librarians protested, the more the image seemed to persist, especially, if these following images from murder mysteries were typical of the decade.

Murder in a Library another novel by Charles Dutton, published in 1931 is dedicated to Forrest Spaulding and his Des Moines Library staff, who of course are unlike any characters in this book. In this mystery, Ruby Merton the personification of the old maid librarian is murdered. She is described as a thin, angular, ill-tempered, sharp-tongued eccentric in everything she did, a repressed neurotic old maid whom life had soured and most of the prizes of life had passed her by. For thirty-five years she had given her life to the service of the public. The reference room had been her kingdom.(151) Apparently this description only fits the older librarian. A younger library worker is described as "a

flashy dame"; she has been seen dancing suggestively at a speakeasy" (252). One thing was certain, the Baghdad was the last place in the city where a member of the library staff should be seen"(252). The Director of the library, Henry Spicer, is also murdered. The antithesis of Ruby, he is "Genial and friendly to the general public. He was well known to a smaller circle as one of the best informed men in his field in the country, a happy, kind man, who lived at an exclusive club with other professional leaders.(196)

A psychologist and amateur detective is brought in to assist with the case. When the police are astonished that a murder could take place in a library of all places, the psychologist explains with this misinformation, that "..once libraries were run only by women and by women who were given the jobs because of two things -- family or position. They must earn a living and it was thought anyone could hand out books. So the libraries were filled with narrow, repressed, neurotic women, whose outlook on life had become a bit warped and soured"(109). "In a library,..anything might happen"(109).

It is very evident that a different image exists for the male librarian. It was a common complaint by women librarians in library literature that men held almost all of the administrative positions and received higher salaries. The image of the bookish cultured scholar remained the male prerogative. Women, in fiction as in real life, were thought to be more suited to the tedious,

detailed work and were expected to have a sacrificial devotion to librarianship that compensated for long hours, tedious tasks and meager compensation.

Even when he is a murderer, the male library director is not portrayed unflatteringly. The Gutenberg Murders revolve around the theft of nine leaves of a Gutenberg Bible from the Sheldon Memorial Library. Several murders take place before the ingenious method of Dr. Prentiss, the murderer is discovered. He is described as, " the scholar of pictures and legends, tall and slender, with a droop to his shoulders that suggested much bending over a desk and long delicate hands that seemed made for caressing the crumbly pages of old books. His white hair waved back from a high commanding forehead, and his gray eyes were at once piercing and contemplative; an odd mixture of shyness and arrogance, he looked like a man with a passion for supremacy but at the same time one who had the born aristocrat's dislike of indiscriminate contacts" (11). "Prentiss is a smart man, he's got just one obsession and that's rare old books" (9).

A novella by Cornell Woolrich, written in 1939 is The Book that Squealed. This novella incorporates almost every stereotype of a librarian and library. The heroine of the story is Prudence Roberts who solves a kidnapping from the clues in a trashy novel with one page torn out of it. Prudence is described as wearing shell-rimmed glasses, knot of hair, drab clothing.(120) Later in the story, she uses her good strong substantial Oxford, nearly as

heavy as a man's with a club heel" as a weapon. The images are not totally unflattering. Prudence quickly receives the attention of the police detective when she takes off her glasses. She is courageous in her protection of the young kidnapped victim, and she is intelligent, "I'm a librarian. I have more brains than whoever did this to this book"(121). Several other images also appear in this novella. The idea of the library and librarian as cultural custodians, and the library as home, with the librarian as hostess are apparent. Prudence has to tactfully remind a gentlemen browser to remove his hat. She turns up her nose in disapproval of the book Manuella gets her man, her light reading consisting of Dickens and Dumas. Prudence may be cultured and refined, but she declines the high-brow movie picture her detective boy-friend suggests for a snappy gangster movie.

The Forties celebrated youth, and the image of the old spinster librarian was an object of scorn and ridicule. The cover of Mademoiselle in September 1943 had a young attractive reader's advisor advertising the fun of working in the modern library. Maybe it was this cover that prompted the December article in Wilson Library Bulletin which reflects a tongue in cheek but very real concern about the library image. Entitled "Sweetiepies for Sourpusses" it blames the old stereotype for everything that is wrong in the library profession. The article suggests change, "and that change involves removing, from the public view at least, a generation of dried up Deweydecimalcontents and turning the

library's personal relations with the public over to the young, the charming, the vigorous, the vivid, the progressive--the new world. It is the proposal of Gracie Boldstroke, a pseudonym, that "All librarians be retired at forty." That "wall eyes, buck teeth, a lumpy bust, and a voice out of a nutmeg grinder should be replaced by glamour, honeyhaired and honeytoned, sloe-eyed and curvaceous and only then, the library will be on the way to higher budgets" (312-313). It is difficult to tell how serious this author was in his remarks; however, the letters in reply the next month indicate that his article was taken very seriously by most readers.

Is it a coincidence that one of the mysteries I found from the forties, The Widening Stain, 1942 has such a glamour girl in it? A blonde, blue-eyed junior cataloger, with a wiggle in her walk. She is told not to expect to be sent to Atlantic City as Miss University Librarian and not to undulate in the library by Gilda Gorham. Gilda is the main female character, who ties to unravel the murder of two professors in the library and is described by herself as "lips pursed too tightly in the habit of disapproval, thin, on the spinsterish side" (3). Yet, she has the admiring attention of both the Library director and a limerick-loving professor. Dr. Sandys the Director is described as large and imposing with an educator's goatee" (5). Though in rescuing Miss Gorham, he is quick on his feet displaying his boxing skills. Harkening back to the words of Melvil Dewey, that "the genteel nature of library work would compensate for the regrettable fact

that women librarians normally received half the pay of male librarians and often received even less than an urban teacher did"(Garrison 178), the staff at the University Library is underpaid, on the pretext that it is respectable and elevating to work among the great books.

In the 1950's mystery Reference to Death, by Lavinia Davis, the small town librarian may be an old maid, but the author draws a warm portrait of the murdered woman, a librarian beloved by the whole town.(94) Mimi Purvis is described as having a heart as big as the ocean. In an interesting twist, a bartender supplies a description of the librarian pointing a lot of truths and stereotypes. " Miss Mimi liked a drink as well as the next one, but she didn't have much money or much time.(Librarians are still putting in those long hours with the meager compensation.) And you know how it is in a small town. The librarian in charge is sort of like the minister's wife. She can't do a thing without having it given the once-over by every old cat in the place. She's gotta be careful....You know, for an old maid, Miss Mimi was awful cute....And "She loved helping people" (74).

One of the most inventive and original mysteries concerning a library was a novel entitled Dewey Death written in 1958 by Charity Blackstock. Each chapter is given a dewey number such as the third chapter, deth 236.1. The murders take place at the Inter-Libraries Despatch Association, peopled by an infinite variety of librarians and personnel, all wonderfully described. Barbara

writes romance novels. Mark Allan "who looked alarmingly like one of Barbara's heroes," handled microfilm. Mrs. Warren, resembles a sinister French concierge, " a stout little person with a resolute hard-cut face, black eyes, and determined legs. " Mr. Ridley , Chief Librarian, an Oxford man..." spent all his life in the world of books"(3). Mr. Rills is a coward with "a tongue of the purest venom"(12). It is Mr. Rills's however that comes out with the most elitist remark since the beginning of the library profession. " We are librarians, and therefore the elect of God. To read is human, to catalogue divine" (81). And, then there is kindly, eccentric Mr. Dodds, a man of sixty-odd with a professorial shock of white hair. It is a fascinating group of characters, and one of them is a murderer.

By the sixties, the sour old spinster had almost disappeared, not that she didn't still make an appearance now and then. Librarians were still portrayed as older unmarried women, but with a definite difference. Often authors had to state that the librarian was not like ordinary librarians such as Miss Herpitude in The Transcendental Murders. Miss Herpitude an older woman, is head librarian of the Concord Public Library, unfortunately killed by a bust of Louisa May Alcott. She was regarded at different from the ordinary librarian since "she did not regard as her sacred task to protect her precious volumes from the clutches of the villainous defacing mob. Instead it was her faith that the proper destiny for any book in her care was to lie open upon the lap of a reader"

(92).

In the seventies, librarians continued to be portrayed as individuals and not as stereotypes. In the Seventh Sinner, 1972, when Jacqueline Kirby, the main character and a librarian is called drab, dull and middle-class, she responds, "Well, I suppose there is an image isn't there? But stereotypes are awfully misleading. There are typical librarians, but not all librarians are typical. Any more than any other profession" (34).

For example, Please Omit Funeral, 1975 by Hildegarde Dolson centers around a murder and a high school censorship crisis. Newly graduated from Library School, Marcy Coving, defends intellectual freedom, after controversial books are removed from the school library. Reflecting the age when it was written, the plot includes a lover for the unmarried librarian.

Two interesting and independent minded librarians are presented in Rest You Merry 1978 by Charlotte Macleod. The murdered librarian is described by her husband as " she minded everyone's business but her own, and she never once shut her mouth that I can remember"(35). This nosiness is reminiscent of the old image, but this librarian is no quiet mouse, but a loud flamboyant creature who has let the dust settle on the Buggins collection. It is up to the new librarian, described unkindly by one character as a man-hungry old maid to put the collection in order. This blonde, blue-eyed, lovely with her Ph.D. was fired from her last position because she told the college president his manuscript was pompous

nonsense.(73-74) Professor Peter Shandy falls for her the minute he discovers she can properly pronounce latin botanical names, and together they solve the murder of the former librarian. The two of them marry and continue to solve mysteries in later books by Charlotte Macleod.

Traces of the sharp-tongued spinster are still to be found. For example, a detective is hired to investigate the mutilation of art books in the library in Final Notice written by Jonathan Valin in 1980. When Harry Stoner first walks into the Library, he comments that the building might be new and modern, but the old ladies behind the desk haven't changed. A very little old lady, with round stooped shoulders looked up at him coolly from behind rimless spectacles, and gave him an overdue frown. He comes to respect their courage as they pitch in to help solve the case and prevent a murder. "Those seven old ladies were probably tougher than, say, your average professional football team"(165). However the image of the library director in this novel is very different from either the scholarly or professional image of the director in mystery novels from the thirties and forties. The director, Leon Reingold is described as a small man in his late thirties, with wavy, lead-colored hair and an incongruous little boy's face that made him look as swart and peevish as an elf. His face becomes wistful however, as he rhapsodizes about the two disk mini from honeywell to computerize circulation. Mystery novelists have acknowledged the entrance of computers into the world of the

librarian.

On-line catalogs and on-line searching of databases for information became common in the late seventies. These changes are reflected in mystery novels of the eighties. In The Bay Psalm Book Murder 1983, a librarian is found dead with a rare book in his hand, the Bay Psalm Book. His daughter asks an English professor to track down the killer since the police don't seem interested in only a librarian. Looking for some answers in the Library, Cliff is helped by a tiny Chinese-American librarian who does an on-line search for information in the *Los Angeles Times*. Cliff also visits the Huntington Library, where his friend Archer is the head librarian. Archer resembled a pirate more than he did a curator of rare books. Standing six feet, four inches tall, broad-shouldered, muscular, with a wicked black moustache, he was a karate expert and a fine sailor. Quite a different image from the last male director and evidence that librarians are portrayed as individuals, not as stereotypical caricatures.

In All Booked UP, written in 1989 there is certainly evidence of computerization even though the assistant director Dr. Sara Tewkesbury, a tall slender woman given to wearing tiger-toothed jewelry, is exasperated by her conservative colleagues and believes that librarians are troglodytes about computers. Computer terminals exist at the circulation desk and information is found in the online catalog, but most importantly to the story, the library

auditor is found murdered with a computer cable. The plot revolves around missing rare books at the Smedley library.

Another mystery, The Mark Twain Murders by Edith Skom, 1989 takes place at a large Midwestern campus library. An English professor is tracking down a suspected case of plagiarism and a murderer. The Library User Information Service, LUIS is described in detail by the author who seems more impressed by computer technology than librarians. Most of the librarians in this novel are ridiculous in their behavior. The director is more upset by the threat of coffee stains on the new carpet, than the bodies that are found. Catching a faculty member with coffee, "You thought you could get away with it. His whole body, from the tiny mustache to the little pot belly, quivered with outrage" (120). Another librarian is nearly panic stricken by the thought of gangs or perverts raping and pillaging in the library.

In the 1980's and 1990's, despite the appearance of the old maid image in magazine articles, TV commercials, and movies, it has practically disappeared in mystery novels. Maybe because mystery novelists are library users themselves, they are more aware than the general public of the changes that have taken place in libraries. They are also certainly aware of the stereotype. In All Hallow's Evil, by Valerie Wolzien, a female librarian attends a costume party wearing a tailed navy suit and mid-height heels. One of other guests comments, "...maybe she has a very acute sense of humor, and she came as a dowdy librarian"(216).

In Die for Love, 1984, the author, Elizabeth Peters, reminds the reader that "Contrary to popular opinion, librarians are not prim, unworldly spinsters, isolated from the modern world; nor are university librarians unacquainted with what is loosely termed popular culture" (8). Jacqueline Kirby, librarian and romance writer, is best known on campus for her feud with the fascists at IRS who refused to allow her deduction of a new TV as a professional expense. (She needed to watch writers being interviewed on the Today show.) Tall, slim, with a mass of auburn hair, her age is not given, though it is known that she has two grown children somewhere at a safe distance. Never at loss for male companionship, police detectives seem particularly attracted to her. Elizabeth Peters has a series of novels with Jacqueline Kirby.

Other series with female librarians as sleuths are set in small towns. Real Murders by Charlaine Harris, 1990 uses a librarian Aurora Teagarden of Lawrenceton, Georgia as her main character. A young, newly divorced woman, she describes herself as " I had a neat and tidy life in a messy world, and if sometimes I suspected I was trying to fulfill the stereotype of a small-town librarian, well I had yearnings to play other roles too" (29). Another series by Kate Morgan has Dewey James as a widowed, semi-retired small town librarian that frequently helps out the incompetent police in solving murders. She is presented as an attractive, helpful, professional.

A well-written series with a male librarian sleuth, Dr George, is by Charles Goodrum, the first book being Dewey Decimated. The authenticity of certain rare books at the Werner-Bok (modelled after the Library of Congress) is questioned. With the help of the public relations officer and a graduate student, the murder of one of the distinguished librarians is solved. Another author, Roy Lewis has several books in which the central character, a male librarian becomes involved with murder and intrigue. Where Agents Fear to Tread, has a middle-aged male librarian, Henry Franklin, involved in murder and mayhem with intelligence agents and blonde spies. Though he proves himself very capable in his new role, he keeps repeating to the unbelieving police that, "I'm a librarian."

Looking at the librarians that have populated mystery novels in the last ten years, it is evident that the old stereotype of the brittle spinster is no longer used except for an occasional humorous reference. One personality trait of the old stereotype that remains constant is the desire to be helpful. The missionary zeal to educate the masses is still present as librarians guide patrons through the information jungle. A tribute to this helpfulness is found in Philip Craig's 1991 novel, The Woman Who Walked Into the Sea. When the main character is researching Shakespeare information in the library, he states, "And Librarians are also treasures. When you can't find something yourself, they will show you how or else find it themselves" (41).

The old image really is a stranger in recent mystery novels.

Not only is the prim old maid image gone, but also the image of the bookish white-haired scholarly male librarian. Instead we see a more accurate representation of the library profession, with many diverse and unique personalities.

Works Cited

Adamson, Deborah. *All the Crazy Winters.* New York: Ballantine, 1992.

Blackstock, Charity. *Dewey Death.* London: Heinemann, 1956.

Boldstroke, Gracie (pseud.). "Sweetiepies for Sourpusses." *Wilson Library Bulletin.* December 1943, p. 312-313.

Bristow, Gwen and Bruce Manning. *The Gutenberg Murders.* New York: The Mystery League, 1931.

Craig, Philip. *The Woman who walked into the Sea.* New York: Avon, 1993.

Curran, Terrie. *All Booked Up.* New York: Worldwide, 1989.

Davis, Lavinia. *Reference to Death.* Garden City: Doubleday, 1950.

Dolson, Hildegarde. *Please Omit Funeral.* Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975.

Dutton, Charles J. *Murder in a Library.* New York: Dodd Mead, 1931.

Dutton, Charles J. *Streaked with Crimson.* New York: Dodd Mead, 1929.

Garrison, Dee. *Apostles of Culture: the public librarian and American society, 1876-1920.* New York: Free Press, 1979.

Goodrum, Charles. *Dewey Decimated.* New York: Crown Publishers, 1977.

Harris, Charlaine. *Real Murders.* New York: Walker and Co., 1990.

Harris, Will. *The Bay Psalm Book Murder.* New York: Walker, 1983.

Johnson, W. Bolingbroke. *The Widening Stain.* Cornell University, 1942.

Langton, Jane. *Transcendental Murder.* New York: Harper, 1964.

Lewis, Roy. *Where Agents Fear to Tread.* New York: St. Martin's, 1984.

McLeod, Charlotte. *Rest You Merry.* Garden City: Doubleday, 1978.

McReynolds, Rosalee, "A Heritage Dismissed" *Library Journal* 110 (November 1, 1985): 25 -31.

Pearson, Edmund, "The Library in Fiction" reprinted in the *Library and the Librarian,* Woodstock, Vt.: The Elm Tree Pr., 1910.

Peters, Elizabeth. *Die for Love.* New York: Tom Doherty Assoc., 1984.

Peters, Elizabeth. *Seventh Sinner.* New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972.

Skom, Edith. *The Mark Twain Murders.* Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 1989.

Smith, Julie. *Huckleberry Fiend.* New York: Mysterious Press, 1987.

Valin, Jonathan. *Final Notice.* New York: Dodd Mead, 1980.

Wolzien, Valerie. *All Hallow's Evil.* Ballantine Books, 1992.

Woolrich, Cornell. "The Book that Squealed." *Chapter and Hearse: suspense stories about the world of books.* Ed. Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini. New York: Morrow, 1985.